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# Reaching Modern Students Through Amazing Screencasts

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“Reaching Modern Students Through Amazing Screencasts”<sup>1</sup>

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## **Introduction**

Whether it's cats running on a treadmill, an inspiring TED Talk, or jaw-dropping time-lapse footage taken from the International Space Station, videos captivate millions of viewers around the world. As librarians and educators, we can emulate what makes these videos popular—a compelling message with an effective delivery—to engage our users and promote our services beyond the library's walls. While we researched other library videos, we found that many videos, including our own early efforts, are poorly produced. Bad audio quality, pixelated images, and wordy PowerPoint slides detract from what would otherwise be compelling content. Students who never approach a research help desk and don't attend library instruction classes need to be reached in other ways. We believe that librarians could use amazing screencasts to increase the level of engagement that student and faculty have with the library.

We started experimenting with screencasts after fielding questions like, “how can I find full text journal articles?” and repeatedly providing the same answers. We created our first screencasts for student employee training, with positive responses. Student workers said things like, “I wish I had this before my research class,” and, “That was easy.” Yet we still felt that our videos could be greatly improved. The audio quality was poor and we never wrote a script or did any editing.

We took a user-centered approach in the making of our next videos. We omitted unnecessary introductions, tightly edited away pauses and gaps of silence, and tried to make the videos as fun to watch as possible. Unlike long video tutorials where students are expected to retain dozens of steps to accomplish a goal, our screencasts are fast and fun to watch. Several videos and many design iterations later, we developed a list of suggestions for creating amazing screencasts.

## **Best Practices**

### 1) Get to the point

Nobody likes waiting, especially your screencast viewers. Many videos include lengthy introductions and overviews: the library's logo, the librarian's title and where they work, the learning outcomes and spelling out the website URL letter by letter are not essential parts of the learning experience.

Students want to begin learning immediately, not in 30 seconds. Try to spend no more than 5 to 10 seconds on introductions and branding. If you embed these screencasts on your library's website, then initial URL navigation and institutional branding has already been covered.

### 2) Use powerful software

Free screencast software has limited or no editing capabilities. We recommend using more powerful software, like Screenflow for Mac and Camtasia for Windows. Both are relatively inexpensive (about \$100-\$300), easy to use, and offer a powerful suite of editing tools.

### 3) Use a good microphone

Professionally produced videos always have excellent audio quality, and so should library videos. With a budget of \$50-\$150 you could purchase an excellent USB condenser microphone which will reduce noise distractions and help the user focus on content. Hearing a high quality audio recording will also signal to your viewers that you take screencasting seriously.

### 4) Edit your videos around a script

Waiting for a website to load in real life is bad enough, but watching a video of someone waiting for a website to load is unbearable, especially for our students. Rather than record a screencast and perform a task simultaneously, you should compose a script, record it using a good microphone, and then edit your video to perfectly fit the script. This will help you create screencasts that are not one second longer than necessary.

### 5) Keep your videos short

No matter how fast paced and engaging you make your screencasts, there's a limited amount of information your students will retain in one sitting. The screencasts that we designed are not tutorials in the traditional sense. After watching the video, students should understand one discrete task or be able to replicate a few basic steps. We've found that 1-3 minutes is an ideal length for a screencast.

### 5) Stay zoomed in

Most of your users will watch your screencast in a small box embedded on a website, not in full screen. If your screencast captures your computer screen and never zooms in, the contents of your screencast will look tiny in that small box. Therefore, you should use your software to zoom in as much as possible, for as long as possible, so that your viewers don't have to squint.

### 6) Be engaging

You want to make videos that you would love to watch. Carefully craft your script to make your topic interesting. Use an excited or engaged tone of voice when recording the script. Use Creative Commons-licensed music for a background track that adds an emotional appeal to the video. You could even use music recorded by your college or university chamber ensemble or marching band.

### 7) Make your screencasts look 3D

Adding a 3D perspective to your screencasts will give them a professional look and feel, and make them look more visually interesting with minimal effort. Professional screencasts often use a camera angle and motion that mimics flying across the screen.

### 8) Collaborate to create

A great screencast has many elements: a script, editing, a voiceover, and music. This affords the opportunity to introduce screencasting to many stakeholders in your library staff and beyond. You could enlist a voice talent among your staff or student workers to record the scripts. You could hire a talented video editor from another department, or a student, to spend the hours necessary to edit screencasts. You could network with musicians on campus to provide music. All of this could

enhance your staff's social and professional interactions.

### **Case Study: Using Screencasts to Promote Institutional Repositories**

Seniors at the College of Wooster are required to deposit a digital copy of their Independent Study (IS) thesis into our institutional repository. With 2012 being the first year this policy was instituted, the library needed to educate students and faculty on how the digital submission process worked. We trained all library staff, answered questions at the research help desk, and created a PDF handout with screenshots. Finally, we created a screencast using all of the techniques and best practices previously mentioned.

Our goal was to show students how easy our website was to use so they would feel confident to try the process themselves. We wrote the script with the Digital Services Associate, the library staff member responsible for loading content into the repository. We enlisted a library student worker with a suitable voice to record the script. We tightly edited the video to reduce unnecessary pauses and website loading times. We were concise in our introduction, edited the video to a script, used 3D camera angles and flyovers, made sure the video was zoomed in the whole time, and played energetic background music licensed under Creative Commons. We uploaded the screencast to YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/cowlibraries>, and prominently displayed the link on the front page of our repository. As a result, our screencast was viewed 241 times from March 3 - 28, 2012 during the height of IS submission season. We heard many positive comments about the video from faculty and students, and the library student employee who read the script reported that fellow students recognized her voice. Using the screencast as one of many outreach and promotion tools lead to virtually all seniors digitally submitting their IS, helping to promote the library as a center for the preservation and dissemination of original undergraduate research.

### **Assessment**

We've collected quantitative assessment data on the popularity of our screencasts. Our library's YouTube account provides analytics that tells us how many times our screencasts were viewed, when they were viewed, which site or search term referred them, and what percentage of viewers watched the video in its entirety. As of this writing, our IS submission screencast has been viewed 317 times, by far the most popular video on our YouTube channel. The newest YouTube analytics tool, "Audience Retention," has provided us with data that tells us if we're grabbing the viewer's attention. Our screencast is 1 minute 53 seconds long. Ideally, every student who watched our video would watch it in its entirety. According to the data, over 90% of viewers watched the video up to 1 minute 32 seconds. In fact, some viewers even watched the video multiple times in one sitting, as evidenced by achieving over 120% retention in some areas. It never falls below 50% until the very last second. YouTube also provides "relative audience retention measures," claiming that up to the 1 minute 32 second mark, our audience retention is "high," then "above average" compared to all

YouTube videos of similar length. Although we can't prove a causal link, we hypothesize that giving our video a professional look and feel, with music, video effects and an enthusiastic voice, engaged our viewers and kept them watching until the very end.

Our qualitative assessment data is purely anecdotal at this point. We have observed instances where playing a screencast led to increased engagement by faculty. For example, one of our academic deans hosted a brown bag event in the library to discuss plagiarism on campus. We offered to play a Zotero screencast we had made to show how easily Zotero can be used to organize and properly cite sources. As a result of that viewing, faculty in attendance invited us to give Zotero training sessions to three classrooms that traditionally had no library instruction. In addition, when we created screencasts to train students on how to provide basic research assistance, they provided reactions such as "I wish I had this for my class last year," and "I think other students would like to watch these."

### **Future Developments**

Is it worth spending the time and effort to create beautiful screencasts? How effective are they compared to lengthy video tutorials? In the future we plan on studying this more systematically. One potential methodology would involve dividing a group of students into two groups: a control group that watches a "bad" video, and an experimental group that watches a beautiful screencast, and surveying each group on their level of engagement and interest before and after watching their respective videos.

An audience member at our workshop suggested adding subtitles for hard-of-hearing patrons. We believe this is an excellent idea for enhancing screencasts. YouTube supports closed captioning in multiple languages, allowing the user to turn them on when needed.

We also plan to develop a training methodology for a student worker who will be our primary screencast and video editor. This will involve basic editing assignments that teach the student how to use screencasting software, keeping in mind our best practices. These training modules would increase in complexity as the student acquired additional skills and practice. Eventually, we hope that we could rely on this student to spend the hours necessary to perfect the screencast editing process.

Finally, creating dozens of amazing screencasts is one thing, but showcasing them in a logical way is another. We will continue to use YouTube for hosting videos. Support for multiple resolution and network bandwidths, video embedding, analytics and mobile devices are among its prized features. We envision creating a LibGuide that will present videos for a variety of basic information literacy competencies, such as search strategies for a variety of disciplines, distinguishing scholarly from popular resources, and the difference between searching a local discovery layer like Summon and Google. Our goal is to reach every student, not just those with the initiative to contact a librarian. We are certain that a sizeable number of students who watched the IS submission screencast did so from

the comfort of their residence hall, or their favorite coffee shop. By using engaging screencasts to introduce basic concepts and skills, we can raise the baseline level of information literacy skills among our target population, increase collaboration, and promote the library's amazing content and services.

You can watch our presentation on YouTube: <http://bit.ly/LOEX2012screencast>  
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